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[Reporter's Notebook: St. Paul Takes Convention Overhaul Like a Champ](#)

by Judson Berger
Monday, September 1, 2008

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ST. PAUL — With the GOP convention thrown into disarray by Hurricane Gustav, it's a good thing St. Paul is the host city.

It's one of the few places that could handle such a drastic change of plans with a smile on its face and a shrug of its shoulders — a “c'est la vie” sort of reaction with a Polish and Italian flare.

After all, businesses and city leaders have been preparing for months for the Republican National Convention. The mood over the weekend was elated as bars and restaurants placed signs welcoming convention-goers outside their

windows and waited for the flood of customers.

When John McCain and convention planners gutted the RNC schedule Sunday, as Hurricane Gustav barreled toward the Gulf Coast and dampened spirits, bartenders and waiters would have had every right to be disappointed.

But instead they were hopeful — hopeful a weakened hurricane would run its course and hopeful things would soon get back to normal at the Republican convention.

I strolled into a bar near the Xcel Center called El Pati Mexican Grill on Monday, where tequila shots and two-for-one pints were unusually abundant so early in the afternoon.

The bartenders joked about the state of affairs in their city.

“We've had more people at a Neil Diamond concert than this,” bar manager Dan Malecha said. “This is a major event, we thought we'd be loaded.”

Cstomers were still streaming in and barkeeps were optimistic.

“I hope it's busy. I hope people come out and drink and have fun and see what St. Paul's all about,” said bartender Trung Nguyen. “People in St. Paul are some of the nicest people around.”

Indeed.

I'm from New Jersey, and I live in Washington, D.C. If you're from either of these places, the following two things will shock you:

1) In St. Paul, I flagged down a cab that already had a passenger in it. The cab driver told me to wait at the corner, and that he'd come back for me. And, after a few minutes, he did. He actually came back for me.

2) The public transit system — their mini-subway — operates on the honor system. I bought tickets to go to and from the Mall of America Sunday and then just walked on to the train car. Nobody checked my tickets. There were no turnstiles through which to scan them. I asked patrons at El Pati's if that was normal, and they said yep. And the fact that the train, God bless it, traveled at about six yards an hour didn't seem to bother anybody — except my Washington, D.C. -born editor.

So St. Paul is waiting for its second wind. Besides, delegates from outside the Gulf states are still buzzing around town, along with hundreds of somewhat under-worked reporters (save for those at FOXNews.com, of course).

Bruce Nader, manager at the Downtowner Woodfire Grill, said what was supposed to be a party atmosphere has sobered a bit because of the hurricane.

“They're coming in, but not as much as we expected,” he said of his customers.

On the bright side, he said, members from the Michigan and Illinois delegations had recently stopped by as did Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman.

He said he was hoping to pull in a few hundred customers Monday night.

James Lockwood, spokesman for St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman, is likewise looking on the bright side.

"There's some parties canceled this evening, but the convention also let out early," he said. "So there actually could be a positive impact.

"We remain open and ready to serve all the people."

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